the continuation of NATO in general or of Western military presence in Indian Ocean in particular.

Countering The Hegemony of the United States

3856. SHRI E. BALANANDAN: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state whether efforts are being made, particularly following the Ayodhya disaster of December 1992, to establish closer relationship, both diplomatic and economic, with the Muslim majority countries of Asia and Africa, in order to counter Pakistani propaganda on Kashimr and also towards formation of an alternative economic-political block to counter the hegemony of the United States in the world affairs?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R.L. BHATIA): Efforts are going on to forge closer economic and diplomatic relationship with these countries in order to counter Pakistani propaganda. There is exchange of visits at all levels. During these exchanges, we have been apprising the leadership of these countries of Pakistan's involvement in promoting terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. Most of these countries have appreciated India's offer to Pakistan of a wideranging and sustained bilateral dialogue on all matters of mutual concern. There is renewed emphasis on promotion of economic relations with these countries after the liberalisation of Indian economy. Ambassadors from some of these countries were included in the group of Ambassadors, who visited Jammu and Kashir for an on the spot study relating to the ground realities there. However, there is no proposal to form any alternative economic-political block with these countries.

Transformation of SAARC into an Economic Community

3857. SHRI E. BALANANDAN: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state whether efforts are being made to transform SAARC into a meaningful economic entity in the line of European Comman Market, permitting free movement of goods and people, to serve both diplomatic and economic ends?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R.L. BHATIA): Efforts are being to transform SAARC into a meaningful economic entity. In this context, Member Countries signed a framework-agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) in April, 1993, during the 7th SAARC Summit in Dhaka. Earlier the Council of Minister at the 12th Session, held in Dhaka on 10-11 December, 1992 had urged the Member Countries to complete all formalities for operationalising SAPTA, including of finalisation of schedules of concessions and the process of ratification before December 1995. They also called on the Member Countries to start immediately the process of negotiating exchange of trade concessions with a view to completing it by December 1993. SAPTA takes into account requirements of SAARC Member Countries and provides for special concessions for least developed countries.

After the signing of the framework agreement, the Inter Governmental Group on Trade liberalisation (dealing with SAPTA) has already held two meetings in Colombo in November 1993 and in Male in April 1994 and the process of exchange of trade concessions is expected to be finalised in September 1994, at its meeting to be held in Islamabad. Trade negotiations require time but with the commitment expressed by all Member Countries at the recently concluded Council of Minister Meeting at Dhaka on 30-31 July, 1994, we hope that SAPTA will be operationalised in the very near future.

The National Chambers of Commerce & Industry from six SAARC Member Countries and FICCI from India have formed the SAARC Chamber of Commerce And Industry (SCCI) and are also working towards transforming SAARC into a meaningful economic entity.

In order to further promote closer and more frequent contacts among the peoples of the region, the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme was initiated in 1988 and the Scheme become operational from March 1, 1992 and 1406 persons had availed of this facility upto June, 1994. Currently, persons entitled to this scheme are:

(a) Supreme Court Judges and their